

**“REFLECTIONS ON PROFESSIONAL NAVAL CHAPLAINCY OVER THE PAST 30 YEARS”**  
**NCMAF CONFERENCE, ALEXANDRIA, VA. , 15 JANUARY 2014**  
**AFCB ENDORSERS CONFERENCE, ALEXANDRIA, VA., 16 JANUARY 2014**

**INTRODUCTION: GREETINGS AND THANKS**

Good morning. It’s a pleasure to be with you today.

For 238 years, Navy chaplains have been privileged to support religious and spiritual needs of members of Naval Service and their families.

One of most important things that Navy chaplains do is offer powerful messages of hope and grace and redemption—as expressed within our many religious traditions.

CNO Admiral Jonathan Greenert often talks about “3 Tenets” that guide him in all he does: Warfighting First, Operate Forward, and *Be Ready!*

He considers part of “being ready” is having the opportunity, if one wants to, to practice one's faith, whatever it might be.

In the language of my own tradition, chaplains can be a visible reminder of presence of God in what can seem to be God-forsaken places and circumstances.

As I look back on over 30 years of ministry as Navy chaplain, I’m convinced that ours is truly a sacred calling. So we seek highly skilled clergy who are the most fully-qualified and who meet the Navy’s requirements to become chaplains. We expect high standards of professionalism and character and integrity from *all* of our chaplains. We’re grateful for the chaplains you’ve endorsed for Naval service who have met those high standards.

As you know, ministry in this dynamic environment—at sea, ashore, and in combat—can be extremely demanding physically, mentally, and emotionally.

Answering the call to serve as Navy chaplain requires us to be well-grounded in our theological tradition and to have a well-defined pastoral identity that is firmly rooted in our religious organization.

And at the same time that call requires us to deeply understand and appreciate the distinctive nature of the military services whose people we serve. In this unique, ever-changing and even volatile environment of institutional ministry, Navy chaplains must always remain ready to respond to the call on a moment’s notice and to adapt to ever-changing circumstances.

**I. THE SEA IS A DANGEROUS PLACE**

It goes without saying—yet sometimes we forget: *The sea is a dangerous place.*

Before Sept. 11th, the Navy conducted Maritime Intercept Ops in the Gulf to prevent oil smuggling by Saddam Hussein. Not long after Sept. 11th, while at 5th Fleet in Bahrain, I got word that an Iraqi tanker up in N. Arabian Gulf had capsized. A Navy boarding party was aboard when the tanker capsized, and while several Sailors were recovered, two were not.

Another chaplain and I, together with the fleet Master Chief, flew up immediately in a helo. We spent several days just walking the decks, talking with Sailors, listening, and held a memorial service. We made arrangements for another chaplain—Tim Gault—to ride that ship for several weeks afterward.

The hunger for hope draws us to look outward *beyond ourselves*—beyond this world—to something greater—to something that is transcendent—to something that is *spiritual*.

That's where chaplains come in. Chaplains build a bridge from the tangible to the intangible in order to enable this divine discussion. Chaplains can be incredibly creative in this. When I was the Division Chaplain for 2d MarDiv in Iraq, one of my chaplains—John Anderson—was assigned to an infantry battalion on Syrian border in small town called Al Qaim. This was a site of an old train terminal—with several railroad cars. He had the idea of opening a little coffee shop in one of railroad cars as a place where his Marines could relax a little between missions. It was called—you guessed it—the “Soul Train,” and it was a great place for Marines to let down their hair—what little they had of it— and for a chaplain to listen and talk with his people.

A few years ago, Jennifer and I visited wounded warriors at the VA Hospital in Tampa. Those are always both humbling and inspiring moments. We were talking with severely injured service members. He was asked—“Are you a man of faith?” His response without blinking an eye: “There's not one of us here that could face each day without it.”

Not long afterward, Jennifer and I visited wounded warriors at Balboa Naval Hospital in San Diego. Jennifer had the opportunity to talk with a young Marine who had one leg amputated below knee. He was eager to demonstrate how his new and special prosthesis—artificial leg—attached to his knee. Jennifer asked if he'd be staying in the Marine Corps—with some regret he said, “No. I won't be able to stay with infantry, and that's what I love. But *I've got a future!*”

Shortly after that, I spoke with a group of wounded warriors there, and we talked about some of life's challenges, which certainly had gotten more challenging for them, given their wounds. And yet—and yet they still had a *future*. They still had *hope*.

It reminded me of the words from the book of the prophet Jeremiah, in which the Lord said to his people who had been suffering in exile in Babylon:

“When 70 years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. For I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, *plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.*” [Jer 29:10-11; RSV]

The wounded soldier in Tampa understood that. So did the wounded Marine in San Diego. So do countless Sailors.

Because chaplains are embedded in commands, because they walk the rugged terrain or rolling deckplates with our people, because they share the hardships of months at sea, far from loved ones back home. Chaplains are often the ones who've earned the trust, who provide a listening ear and thoughtful words—or compassionate silence—in times of personal crisis. It's a presence that *restores hope* and offers *redemption and reconciliation*.

## II. MINISTRY IN A PLURALISTIC ENVIRONMENT

The three and a half years since I became Chief of Chaplains have been an *interesting* time, to say the least. Nonetheless, our core principles and capabilities and reason for existence as a Chaplain Corps have not changed.

We support and protect *religious freedom* for all who answer the call to serve—in Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard. And that includes chaplains.

In fact Jan. 16, as you may know, marks National Religious Freedom Day. The constitutional right to the free exercise of religion is a right we hold most dear as Americans, and it's the reason for which we, as chaplains, have been appointed to serve in the Naval service.

Navy chaplains have always been familiar with *providing* ministry to those of our own and similar faith groups; *facilitating* for needs of those holding convictions very different from our own, to include those with no religious beliefs; as well as *caring* for all of our people and *advising* our commanders.

We're well-accustomed to working with other chaplains, or civilian clergy, or other helping professionals to make appropriate *referrals* for needs we can't meet.

As we work together, we demonstrate a deep understanding of the need for cooperation and mutual respect—in the inherently diverse and pluralistic environment of our Nation's military. This spirit of cooperation does *not* mean compromising one's individually held beliefs. Mutual respect doesn't mean we agree theologically and when we disagree with each other—which, of course, we sometimes do, we need to do so *respectfully*. Even—dare I say it—*gracefully*.

In all of this, our chaplains continue to conduct their ministry with integrity and compassion, in ways that meet the requirements of their religious organization, the Chaplain Corps, and the Naval Service. Now if you have concerns that a chaplain is being required to do something contrary to the tenets of the chaplain's faith, I urge you to contact my office. I've also encouraged our chaplains to contact their supervisory chaplain, their chain of command, or you, their endorser, with any concerns in this area. And as I said, I encourage *you* as an endorser to contact our office to share those concerns.

But just as we have for 238 years, we will continue to obey the law, treat our people with dignity and respect, and care for all—which can include appropriate referrals.

Through the spirit of cooperation, we reinforce a core capability of what we call “Professional Naval Chaplaincy”— to *care for all* with dignity, respect, and compassion, irrespective of an individual’s beliefs.

While there has been a notable improvement in our ability to work together cooperatively and respectfully in recent years, this progress is fragile, and it can always be eroded if we lose our commitment to the principles of Professional Naval Chaplaincy.

This same cooperative spirit applies to the endorsing bodies of our chaplains. My fellow Chiefs and I count on you to work with each other and with us in a spirit of mutual respect; always recognizing the rights of others to determine their own religious convictions.

As always, we must not lose sight of our shared goal: To meet the religious needs of our brave men and women who wear the cloth of our nation and their families.

Now some of the greatest challenges we face today stem from the ongoing fiscal challenges faced by the government. These challenges have had some impact on our civilian staff and contract religious support personnel. They have also affected the way we *travel* and do business, to include holding our own conferences. Funded conference attendance is under serious pressure and scrutiny given continued budget shortfalls, and that includes chaplain attendance at their own endorser’s training events. But especially in these volatile times, I know the importance of your role as pastor and shepherd to your chaplains. Maintaining this connection is particularly critical for chaplains in isolated assignments.

But through all this fiscal uncertainty, our calling has not changed, nor have the demands of Naval chaplaincy.

### **III. STRATEGIC PLAN AND COMMUNICATIONS**

We have been developing a strategic plan for religious ministry within the Dept. of the Navy to support the next few years. It will emphasize how we can best serve our people, how best to engage with leadership on critical issues, and how to establish and meet professional standards that are critical to our effectiveness and credibility as chaplains.

We will make the strat plan available to you once it’s released. I hope this document will help you understand where we’re headed as a Chaplain Corps as well as help you to set expectations with your candidates who are considering entering Naval chaplaincy.

I’d like to take a moment to update you on a few communication initiatives we’ve been working on over past 12 months. Based on feedback from last year’s conference, we established a special resource page for you on our website at [www.chaplain.navy.mil](http://www.chaplain.navy.mil). There, you’ll find DoD policies, recruiting information, and commonly used forms, such as the DD Form 2088.

In November 2013, on the 238<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Navy Chaplain Corps, we launched the official blog of the Navy Chaplain Corps on DoDLive. That's the same blog platform used within the DoD and DoN. I invite you to engage with our new blog as well as our Facebook pages. You can find links to both at our chaplain.navy.mil website.

In addition, we'd like to continue the conversation beyond this conference on matters that affect your chaplains. We plan to e-mail periodic updates to help you keep up with policy and manpower developments. We'd also like to use these updates to highlight good-news stories on their ministry to our people, stories that you can share with your civilian faith groups.

So thank you for your feedback. We'll continue to look for new ways to keep you informed about matters that you might find important for your Navy chaplains.

## CONCLUSION

As all of you know so well, we're still a nation at war. Many of our people and their families are recovering in various ways, from years of deployments and operational stress.

The drawdown in Afghanistan continues, but dangers and challenges persist there and elsewhere. Our chaplains and RPs remain forward-deployed around the world supporting those in harm's way, in addition to ministering to those on the homefront and all those experiencing the realities and effects of multiple deployments and combat tours.

There is no greater privilege for us, as chaplains, than to serve those who serve our nation.

We can accomplish that best when you send us your *best and most fully-qualified people*. When they come to us emotionally mature and well-grounded in their faith and pastoral skills, while also being fully qualified physically and of the highest ethical standards, *we* are able to teach them to be effective chaplains who have a profound and life-changing impact on our people.

Let me close by saying once again, Thank you for sending us your people and for your support of the Navy Chaplain Corps, and for all those whom we are "*called serve.*"

Thank you.